

Jane Austen and the Domestic Life

The Jane Austen Guide to Life

By Lori Smith.

Skirt/Globe Pequot Press, 2012. xi + 212 pages.

Hardcover. \$8.78 at Amazon. \$9.99 Kindle edition.

Cooking with Jane Austen and Friends

By Laura Boyle.

Trail Publishing, 2010. 68 pages.

Paperback. \$14.99 from Cookingwithjane.com

Review by Christine Mitchell.

Anyone who is familiar with Jane Austen's era is also well acquainted with the fact that, aside from dancing and feigning interest (or non-interest) in available partners, characters in her novels spend much of their time in the domestic arena. The female characters in particular are expected to know the finer points of husbandry, i.e., care and management of the home, along with the proper way to behave in almost any situation. Although cookbooks and manners guides had been written and published in Britain since the early Middle Ages, young women were most often taught these skills by their mothers or governesses, generally with the end goal of attracting a suitable spouse.

Now, we have the opportunity to learn for ourselves how to live and cook in the Regency manner. Smith and Boyle have both produced small but interesting volumes based on their own studies of Jane Austen and her milieu. Times have changed, and tastes have evolved, but the desire for the types of books reviewed here still exists, and probably will as long as people seek refinement.

Smith's *Guide to Life* draws on lessons the author claims she learned from her reading of Austen's novels and biographies. Calling the book an etiquette guide with a Jane Austen flavor would be a disservice, as it is much more. As the title suggests, Smith has written a handbook for living, one that depends upon a more civilized and cultured era for its structure and values.

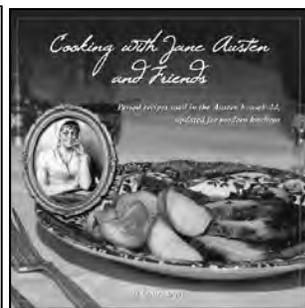
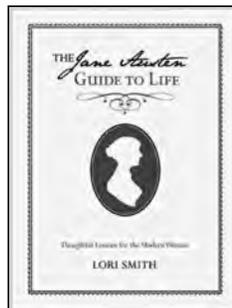
Each chapter begins with an observation on or reference to Austen's own life. For example, Chapter 1, "Living Your Dreams," affirms a commonly held belief—that women in Austen's time were "neither expected nor allowed to work"—yet, "Jane Austen lives on because she . . . picked up her pen and told stories." Smith then juxtaposes our contemporary times with those of Austen, commenting on pithy adages ("Do the unexpected" or "Share your gifts with the world") to show how Jane's life may correlate to our own. The chapters each provide a number of quotations or references to specific scenes from the novels, and Smith appropriately weaves such allusions into the fabric of modern life.

To be sure, the book includes such predictable chapters as "Finding a Good Man" and "Marrying Well," but they are tempered with the very sort of caution and deliberation that Jane herself advocated for her more respectable characters such as Elizabeth Bennet and Elinor Dashwood. Smith wants readers to know she recognizes that young women of any day and age want love and companionship; however, she acknowledges that in today's world, so many more choices are open to them.

Guide to Life cites many of Austen's letters to friends and family in addition to the novels, revealing a handbook that is more scholarly than it would perhaps first appear. Smith's brief yet interesting book lives up to its subtitle: "Thoughtful Lessons for the Modern Woman."

In another vein, Boyle's *Cooking with Jane Austen and Friends* provides readers with "period recipes that Jane Austen was familiar with," thankfully adapted for modern tastes and culinary experiences. Like Smith, Boyle acknowledges that times have changed, and cuisine that was acceptable or expected in the early nineteenth century needs updating.

Boyle arranges her cookbook in a logical fashion; she begins with, appropriately,



breakfast dishes, progresses across the various dinner courses (soups, sides, and main dishes), wends her way through desserts (pudding, sweets, and teatime treats), and ends with beverages, fortified and not. The final pages offer advice on how to host parties that were de rigueur in Austen's day: tea, dinner, and card parties.

Each recipe comes replete with a suitable quotation from an Austen novel or explanation of the dish, or both. Every recipe is complemented by a drawing by either Hugh Thomson or C.E. [Charles Edmund] Brock, the original illustrators of Austen's books, among others. The sketches add a touch of Regency authenticity to techniques and ingredients more suitable for twenty-first century palates. In addition, Boyle cites a bibliography of historical and contemporary sources.

Among the more appealing dishes are Martha Lloyd's Macaroni and Cheese and Rosings Roast Beef and Yorkshire Pudding, both having been modernized. In fact, almost all of the recipes in Boyle's little book should entice readers who like to cook and/or to eat. The breakfast dishes are easy, and the desserts are, as they should be, "sinfully delicious." Only two of the recipes in the book may discourage American foodies: Mr. Wodehouse's Smooth and Wholesome Gruel and Mutton à la Mansfield.

In short, both of these books will give readers a lighthearted glance into Austen's life and time. Smith and Boyle have written entertaining little books that may help readers recapture those moments and activities today.

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